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AGAIN THE CALL TO DUTY¹

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It seems a far cry tonight from that hour, two years ago, when I stood here with other friends of the Vassar Training Camp to speed you on your way—not to the fields of France, but to those other battle fields—our great hospitals, where the never ending warfare against disease goes steadily on as it has for centuries past. And there at Bellevue, at Philadelphia, at Boston City you found your Argonne forests, your St. Mihiel, your Belleau Wood. To no members of our Army Nursing Service in France or elsewhere, was applied a test of courage or spirit more searching, more severe, than that which you faced during those first awful weeks of grappling with deadly pestilence.

To us of the older generation, anxious watchers from without, the way in which you met that test, the quiet heroism, the unfaltering devotion to the duty before you, can never be forgotten.

Caught up by the great tide of emotion which had swept over our country, having offered yourselves for difficult service, in a field of conspicuous importance in war, and fresh from those wonderful weeks of inspiring teaching by great teachers, it is hardly to be wondered at that you brought with you the glow and the exaltation which carried you so gallantly through that tragic crisis. Beyond all question you were then “by the vision splendid” on your way attended.

But the real tests of life, I suppose, do not come to us in those great and stirring moments. Our actual characters, our genuine strength and worth are not shown in the ardor of our response to such appeals. They reveal themselves in the steadfastness with which we hold to a high purpose through the dull routine of daily duty, over long periods; in the fortitude and faith with which that purpose is pursued in the face of discouragement and sometimes defeat; in the dauntless spirit which holds “that tasks in hours of insight willed can be through hours of gloom fulfilled.”

In his *Energies of Men*, William James is very clear on this subject. He describes those mothers or daughters who had successfully held their families together over long and difficult periods by sheer force of valiant will, taking all the thought and doing all the work: nursing, teaching, cooking and sewing, and soothing and smoothing

¹ Addressing the Alumnae of the Vassar Training Camp, November 26, 1920.

the whole neighborhood into finer shape: and "Human nature," he says, "responding to the call of duty, appears nowhere sublimer than in the person of these heroines of family life."

It is largely this spirit, this refusal to look upon the daily duty—made up of the necessary tasks of life—as a kind of slavery; this sense of responsibility for standing by our work as a captain stands by his ship, which forms the bone and marrow of nursing.

I have been thrilled of late by a simple little story which came into my hands from a rural district nurse describing her work. I do not even know her name, but because she is one of our sisterhood, I am sure she would be willing to let me read it to you. (This account was finally extracted from the nurse after several appeals for information had been sent her.)

Work established.—June 8, 1908.

Number of nurses.—One. Has been here twelve and one-half years.

Kinds of cases cared for.—Surgical, medical, obstetrical, tuberculosis, also contagious, exclusive of scarlet fever, smallpox and diphtheria.

This is a rural district of 63 square miles with a population of 2950. It also includes 12 small villages. The nurse responds to calls from all the villages. Conveyance is by an automobile driven by the nurse. Emergencies and obstetrical calls in neighboring towns are also cared for by the nurse, and daily service given, when it does not interfere with the work of this town.

Only obstetrical calls, and calls of extreme urgency are answered at night. Sometimes it has been necessary for the nurse to remain 24 hours on urgent cases, until relieved by a private nurse.

In May, 1916, the industrial work at the Fuse Plant was taken over or, rather, established by this Visiting Nurse Association. This factory has an excellent emergency hospital where its employees are cared for daily.

At intervals since 1908, the nurse has been called into the schools, of which there are 11 district, 2 graded grammar, and 1 high school. The pupils number about 850. In 1919, the nurse was appointed a regular school nurse, making weekly visits and having routine class inspection with five-minute health talks, doing dressings for skin diseases, and abrasions, in the school buildings. Defects were noted and parents informed, follow up work in the homes, and transfers to hospitals for corrections of defects, have been attended to by the nurse. Much improvement was noted of the children as well as of the parents and homes. (We have a large foreign population of Polish, Lithuanians, Italians, French and Spanish, owing to the factory and tobacco plantations.) We are now planning for a dental clinic. Infant and child welfare work are of great importance as also is the tubercular work, follow-up work with nursing service or instructive visits being given by the nurse in the homes.

The nurse has assisted at over 1500 confinements (without the loss of a mother), in 106 of which the patient was delivered by the nurse, when a physician was not get-at-able. Three confinements in 17 hours, or 4 in 22 hours, all in different parts of the town, have been cared for with the nurse assisting at the delivery.

We have several charitable organizations in this town, and churches, as well as the Red Cross Chapter which gives assistance to those needing it, but investigation is made by the nurse, and results tabulated.

The information given in this letter does not mean statistics, but facts. Needless to say, the nurse is busy, but with the hearty coöperation of the townspeople, Board of Education, Fuse Plant, Red Cross Chapter, and other organizations, the work is enjoyable, and results have been attained in the twelve and a half years of the life of this association. The writer has had the pleasure, also the hard work, of being the nurse for the above length of time.

I can hear you say, "How do you manage to do it alone?" The answer is simply that the work, though grown tremendously, has concentrated much more since the addition of the industrial and school work. The parents of the school child are seen at the factory, or at their homes as district patients, time is saved and duplication of work is avoided. All this work just dovetails, thus saving a loss of time and labor while the circle is being completed.

This is just to show you a little of the scope of my work, and to offer an apology for not writing before, but really, I am busy 26 hours out of the 24! I love it. It is no credit to me, for I cannot help it, and I would do just the same wherever I was, or whatever field I entered.

From this letter you perhaps realize that monotony is something that never seems to appear in the day's routine, so varied and numerous are the calls.

Very beautiful to me is this picture of nursing—with its firm and helpful hold upon life's realities and human necessities, with its wealth and variety of human relationship, with its almost infinite opportunities for kindness and tenderness and with its sacred intimacies,—and rich indeed is it in friendships and good will.

Nowhere can this picture take on a fuller and finer embodiment than in our great hospitals wherever the true spirit of nursing is at work permeating and guiding their "sleepless energy." To seeing eyes those years of hospital service are a matchless experience and as time goes on, you will probably feel as most of us do that it is one of your most precious and enduring possessions,—that you would not part with it for anything.

Yet there is no work apparently which can wholly safeguard us against ourselves,—and it is, I am sure, certain that some of you during the past two years have had many dark and doubtful hours. "Am I she who once stood on Crimean Heights?" cried Florence Nightingale in such a moment of desolation. This note of despondency was simply the utterance of a soul striving after perfection and finding the path difficult and thorny. (But her biographer intimates that her remedy for such moods might lie in turning immediately to write a chapter on "Drains.")

Now, if for any of you the vision of two summers ago has faded or vanished, may this not be the hour and the day to try to recapture it, to try to grasp the fact that nurses everywhere are engaged in a warfare that is in one sense even greater than that in which our world has been engulfed. Strange that any one should fail to see this!

There were, it is true, millions of men finally drawn into active combat during the war, but there were periods of cessation from actual fighting, and all of them knew that the war would end,—but what have we in our war against disease? We have constantly, at all times, 3,000,000 of our people seriously sick and battling for their lives with an invisible enemy. They have been attacked in all of the places where they have to live and work; in the mines, the factories, the railways, and shops, the streets, and even in their homes and often the sufferer himself has not only had no share of bringing the disease or injury, but no knowledge of what has brought it or what he might have done to avoid it. Yet fully half of all these diseases are preventable and, says Dr. Welsh, if we would apply the knowledge we now have, we could cut the present death rate in two.

Now, unquestionably we as nurses have a good deal of that knowledge, and for the uses we make of it there rests upon us, I suppose, an obligation and a responsibility which no one of us would consciously evade.

In the public health field, to which doubtless many of you will be drawn, there is abundant evidence that the work of nurses has brought about a reduction both of morbidity and mortality. This branch of nursing seems to be one of the most humanly satisfying occupations in which a mere mortal can be engaged, for it appears to be ready to concern itself with about the entire range of human activities, and to cover the full span of human life from infancy to second childhood. With such a vast field for the display of our energies, it will be long before the supply of nurses with the special training needed will be able to meet the demand. Its inherent attractions are such, however, that no words of mine are needed to commend it to you.

Nor, because it will be left to others, shall I speak of private nursing, by far the largest branch of our work, though it is interesting to note that it occupies a relatively smaller proportion of nurses to the entire body of the profession than private practice does of medical men.

There is one branch of nursing, however which cannot safely be neglected, and this lies in our hospitals and training schools, where the teaching and shaping of future nurses for their varied tasks is now going on, and where in large part I believe it will inevitably continue. These schools are the fountain head of all of our work, creating and shaping our traditions, ideas, ideals, and methods. There are nearly 1600 of these schools established in hospitals of every kind, public and private,—large and small,—in city and country.

The system under which nurses are trained is a peculiar one,

like no other now in existence so far as I know. Far ahead of its day when created by Florence Nightingale, it is now in many of its aspects outworn and unable to meet the strain of today's needs in the education of nurses. Nurses of the present generation have struggled to introduce obviously necessary reforms, but it is as difficult as ever it was to pour new wine into old bottles. The training of student nurses is interwoven so completely with the actual care of the sick in hospitals that the very existence of many of these institutions would be imperilled if the training school were withdrawn, or even if changes were to be made which greatly limited its actual nursing service to the sick. It is difficult to push forward educational reforms which so react upon others, many of whom are helpless. The almost complete dependence of the hospital upon the training school for nursing service has made educational progress painfully slow and difficult, while the entire dependence of the training school upon the hospital for funds, has ensured the restriction of educational work to the barest minimum required for safety in practice. It should never be for one moment forgotten by any nurse that hospital training schools are the only institutions in existence that attempt to carry out an educational scheme with virtually no financial resources. Let me repeat here what I said two years ago,—that hospitals as I have known them, are continually the scenes of quiet heroisms, of high devotion to duty, of constant sacrifice of self, but the attitude of hospitals to training schools is another matter.

Well may our schols say as Christian, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, said to Pliable who urged him to mend his pace,—“I cannot go as fast as I would by reason of this burden which is on my back.”

Now it is certain that profound changes in this system must take place, indeed, in some schools certain important improvements are even now going on. But it is equally certain that the kind of educational advances needed cannot be worked out and carried forward by those who are unfamiliar with modern educational methods and ideals.

At this time when several of our leading universities have seen the significance of nursing in the scheme of the world's work, and have taken over the conduct of schools of nursing, when other universities are considering similar action, when a new world in nursing actually seems opening before us, we are delayed and hindered and our progress is impeded because we have too few among us who combine with a sound educational foundation, the administrative ability and experience which would be necessary in the development of a new method. From our training schools whatever they are or may become, must arise the leaders of all forms of future nursing,—

the superintendents of nursing in our hospitals, the principals of our schools of nursing, and the entire body of assistants, instructors, supervisors and head nurses. Records, though inadequate, show that over 10,000 nurses are now occupied in such capacities in our hospital schools of nursing, and I have no hesitation whatever in saying that every one of them ought to be a woman of liberal education and of first-rate ability, but saying so will not make her so.

From our schools too must come that army of public health nurses who are to carry their beneficent efforts into homes, schools, factories, and into our long neglected rural districts. These are all leaders in a way in their several fields, and their training is by no means adequately worked out yet, nor are their fields of work properly organized or developed.

Such improvements in our schools as will first draw in to them women of good potentialities and then draw forth and shape their highest powers, are what we need. Such reforms as are needed are not brought about by those who stand outside and point to defects and flaws in the structure. In so far as nursing is concerned, anybody can do that. Indeed, I presume that no educational system would be exempt from such criticism. To me the one way of remedying the defects in our hospital training schools is from within, and those who are to contribute greatly toward the rebuilding of our educational structure must bring, not only much knowledge and ability, but constructive imagination, sympathy, and great patience.

We shape the future in nursing just as surely by what we do not do, as by what we do, and it may be that the great choice for some of you is still to be made. I would invoke for you, if I could, the spirit of our pioneers—those nurses of the past who transformed hospitals from the degraded position into which they had fallen into the safe and useful institutions upon which we all lean so heavily in time of trouble, and who have brought our schools to such a degree of efficiency that they are justified of their works in thousands upon thousands of homes and families and in a public demand for nurses which it seems impossible to satisfy.

My last word to you then, is not unlike my first. It still breathes of duty. It points to what still remains to be done.

“Stern Lawgiver, yet thou dost wear
The Godhead’s most benignant grace
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face.”